

ARTICLE APPEARED
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Summer 1985*John Steinbruner***ARMS CONTROL:
CRISIS OR COMPROMISE**

The issues of strategic arms control are complex in their technical details, but they nonetheless revolve around a reasonably simple central problem. The United States is primarily interested in reducing the level of strategic force deployments in order to alleviate a perceived threat to the U.S. intercontinental ballistic missile forces and a politically sensitive imbalance in weapons deployed in Europe. The Soviet Union is primarily interested in restricting the process of technical improvement in order to alleviate what it perceives as an emerging threat to Soviet ICBMs and ultimately to the entire structure of Soviet military forces. With the United States committed to revising the past and the Soviet Union to shaping the future, viable compromise requires arrangements that do both. The issues are too extensive and the underlying hostility too great to allow an immediate, comprehensive solution. Thus, compromise must be achieved through a series of partial measures, each of which balances force reductions and modernization restrictions.

Recent arms control negotiations have not focused on a balanced but limited combination of force reductions and weapons modernization restrictions, and that fact has virtually precluded their success. The proposals the U.S. and Soviet governments have advanced could be supplemented or combined in a variety of ways to embody such a balance, but in the context of related events the practical opportunities are limited. The Strategic Defense Initiative announced by the United States and the Soviet reaction to that announcement have made the issue of weapons in space a necessary element of any immediate compromise. Both in the substance of security and in the politics of adversarial diplomacy, that issue has become the gate to all others.

To the extent that an objective perspective is possible on matters so dominated by national sentiment, it appears that an agreement restricting the direct use of weapons in space is of overriding mutual interest for both countries. The reasons are quite fundamental. Over the past 20 years, space has been accepted as a sanctuary for gathering and communicating information necessary for the safe and stable management of

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worldwide military operations. The satellites that support these purposes depend upon mutual tolerance that has been established in practice, though not legally defined. They are susceptible to disruption and are highly vulnerable to deliberate attack. Both the United States and the Soviet Union have long been able to improvise indiscriminate attacks in space that would damage their own satellites as well as the opponent's, but neither has fully developed the weapons and organizations dedicated to precise and systematic destruction of the opponent's assets. Both are now in the early stages of doing so. If not established by formal agreement, the informal tolerance that now protects intelligence and communication activities in space is likely to be degraded very severely, with consequences for the stability of international security far greater than those posed by any of the weapons issues that are more prominently discussed.

The most important threat to each country does not arise from weaknesses in political resolve, technical capacity, organizational competence or destructive firepower. The gravest threat is the inability to impose reasonable restraint, a mutually acknowledged problem for which each prefers to blame the other. There is in fact plenty of blame to be shared and, simply on practical grounds, each country would be well advised to begin at home. In the case of the United States, that requires adjustments in our strategic arms control policy.

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